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Leadership Development in MBA Programmes: Promoting Students' Learning through Assessment Processes that Focus on Critical Reflection

Abstract

In the past two decades, organisations have taken considerable interest in developing and improving the leadership skills of their managers. As a result, leadership education within MBA programmes has become increasingly popular in higher education. Although these MBA programmes assured to turn their students into inspirational leaders, capable of creating value for their organisations, research shows that these programmes rarely produced the high outcomes, the universities and business schools promised. This paper argues that leadership education in MBA programmes need to focus towards innovative and alternative approaches that encourage proactive critical reflection on conventional leadership theories and practices. The paper explores how the process of assessment for learning that focuses on critical reflection can promote leadership development in MBA programmes.

Page 2:

Introduction

Today's world presents unique challenges and opportunities for organizations in the private and public sector that operate in environment characterised by constant change and growing complexity. Many argue that the leadership plays significant role in meeting such challenges and leveraging the opportunities(DeRue et al., 2011). So, unsurprisingly the overall interest in leadership in organisations has exploded, assuming that leadership can solve all the problems in organizations and yield the expected organisational outcomes (see Schyns et al., 2011). This in turn has created a huge demand for leadership courses in business schools and other departments (e.g. health, education, government) in universities globally and in particularly business schools are increasingly focus on leadership education in their MBA and undergraduate programmes (Doh, 2003).

And yet unlike some of the more well-established academic disciplines such as mathematics, medicine, physics etc there is no single way of teaching leadership in business schools as there is a considerable diversity in the way that leadership is defined or interpreted (Murphy and Johnson, 2011). Many years ago the influential US leadership scholar Warren Bennis made a very significant comment on this complex and confused state of conceptualisation of leadership, which is still considered as true:

"Always it seems, the concept of leadership eludes us or turns up in another form to taunt us again with its slipperiness and complexity. So we have invented an endless proliferation of terms to deal with it....and still the concept is not sufficiently defined" (Bennis, 1959)

Consequently, researchers define leadership in terms of traits, behaviours, influence, interaction patterns , role relationships and occupation of an administrative position, although most of these definitions emphasise on leaders' role of influencing people or groups in organisations to meet organisational goals(Yuki, 2013). The spectrum of such definitions draw on popular theories on leadership such as "transformational leadership" and subsequently many leadership education programmes in business schools are informed by these theories (Collinson, 2014). However the validity and practical effectiveness of such theories are criticised by many researchers and practitioners alike, (Hannah et al., 2014) and as a result many leadership education programmes informed by these theories rarely produced the high outcomes they promised, although they assured to turn their students to inspirational leaders, capable of creating value for their organisation and making a difference in the world (Pfeffer and Fong, 2002).

For example, the behaviours of banking leaders during the recent financial crises demonstrated how their self-interest countermanded the wider institutional and societal interests and contributed to the great financial crises, though the most these leaders were products of prestigious business schools in the west (Board, 2010). Here the less powerful, lower level leaders in banking sector were not capable of preventing powerful senior leaders' deviant behaviour despite having knowledge that these behaviours could have very harmful consequences (see Kerr and Robinson, 2011). The central argument here is that the business schools leadership programmes not only tend to focus on maximising profits by downplaying the importance of morals and ethics of leadership, but they also fail to produce leaders

capable of critically evaluating the behaviours of dominant leaders and exhibiting "dissent" if such behaviours disregard organizational and societal values (see Mingers, 2000).

The alternative approach of leadership education explored in this paper is rooted in the assumption that leadership education programmes should be based on the critical evaluation of leadership role in organisations and society as a whole. This approach urges students to probe theory and practice which is based on the view that leaders hold power over others as they have powerful personalities and exceptional capabilities and which in turn leaders do not need to take into account of worthy views of followers. In other words, this critical approach refutes the hegemony of a single legitimate view point and encourage students to recognise the importance of (1) constructively questioning dominant views of privileged positions in organizations whilst addressing the issues of power dynamics in the organizations and (2) offering alternative critical actions. However, this approach comes with the caveat that seriously challenging the existing power structures is extremely difficult task as such questioning can provoke strong reactions from the power bases in organizations (see Collinson and Tourish, 2015, Mingers, 2000).

In line with this approach the students need not only to learn leadership theories but also to question the taken for granted assumptions in such theories and practices of leadership (see Sinclair, 2007). Here the central assumption is that learning takes places where theory meets experience through reflection (Mintzberg, 2004). However the assessment practices play significant role in students' learning, and good assessment practices prepare students for professional life in real-world context (Pereire et al., 2015). For example Havnes (2004) points out:

"Improving student learning implies improving the assessment system. Teachers often assume that it is their teaching that directs student learning. In practice, assessment directs student learning, because it is the assessment system that defines what is worth learning"
 (Havnes, 2004, p 1)

Although there are several types of assessment in higher education this paper focuses on "assessment for learning" in leadership development in MBA programmes. Consequently next section describes and discusses the process of assessment for learning. The paper then explores how the process of assessment for learning that focuses on critical reflection can promote leadership development in MBA programmes.

Assessment for learning

Research over a long period of time indicates that assessment practices have major impact on students' learning (Light and Cox, 2003). Such practices influence (1) the approach (deep or surface) students adopt towards their learning (2)how students devote time to particular subject area (3)how students intention to study the subject area widely, and (4) their understanding of the key concepts of the subject area (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007). This suggests that leadership education in MBA programmes needs to pay a considerable attention to assessment practices in order to enhance students' effort, approach and outcomes.

The assessment can occur throughout the education activities (e.g. throughout a module), although it is traditionally regarded as an activity, that happens at the end of learning. Earl (2003) classifies

assessment practices as (1) assessment of learning, (2) assessment for learning and (3) assessment as learning. In this calcification the assessment of learning refers to the summative assessment that takes place at the end of a learning programme to evaluate students' achievement in regard to specific learning outcomes (e.g. examination). On the other hand assessment for learning represents formative assessments that take place throughout a learning programme, and provides necessary information as a feedback for students (e.g. assessment of a group presentation in a class) and lecturers alike. Finally assessment as learning occurs when students monitor their own learning (e.g. peer assessment). However as mentioned earlier, this paper focuses on assessment for learning in leadership education in MBAs.

In the literature on higher education there is little theorisation on "assessment for learning" (see Jenkins, 2010) but research shows that the emphasis shifts from "assessment of learning" to "assessment for learning" and now the latter is widely known as "formative assessment" (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007). Formative assessment occurs continuously during the learning, rather than at the end. In this formative assessment process, the lecturer understands how learning progress whilst the student realize exactly what they are to learn and what is expected of them. Here the feedback and feed forward plays significant role by providing adequate information about students' performance to improve their learning experience (Yorke, 2003). Such feedback and feed forward need to be specific, accurate, timely, clear and focus so that the student can use them to improve their further learning by evaluating their strengths, weaknesses and then recognizing areas for development and strategies for improvement. This implies that that students learn better in formative assessment compared to summative assessment (Jenkins, 2010). Equally, the lecturer's teaching can be informed by the formative assessment, and as a result the lecturer would be able to modify and improve her/his teaching in response to the information she/he receives about students' learning (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007).

Despite the above discussed positive aspects of formative assessments there are many issues that could reduce such positive impact on students' learning experience (Jenkins, 2010, Yorke, 2003):

- The students' ability to understand and take in the advice offered through feedback and feed forward

- The reduction in the amount of attention that the lecture can give to the student due to the increasing students/staff ratio , continuous restructuring of curriculum, growing administrative work, increasing focus on research, funding constraints, and increasing focus on standard of teaching in the current higher education environment

- The time pressure students experience that affects their learning experience

Promoting students' learning through the assessment Process in leadership development in MBA programmes

As mentioned earlier learning takes places where theory meet experience through reflection (Mintzberg, 2004). Here the argument is that leadership learning can be improved by proactive critical reflection on leadership theories and practices. So the critical reflection should be an integral part of the summative and formative assessments of leadership education in MBA programmes. However my focus here is formative assessment (i.e. assessment for learning) and I will explore how the practice of critical

reflection in leadership education in MBA programmes within "formative assessment process" can promote students' learning.

Critical Reflection and Student Engagement

Raelin (2001) argues that reflection is much more than evaluating theories and practices rather it enables people to critique taken for granted assumptions in organizations and become open to alternative ways of reasoning and behaving. When critical elements are integrated to the reflection, the whole process (critical reflection) becomes "a ruthless and courageous examination and deconstruction of assumptions, norms, expectations, limitations, language, results and applications of one's work" (Boyce, 1996,9). In the classroom setting lecturers introduce various theories, models, concepts on leadership where students bring their organizational experience to the classroom. Leadership learning takes place when these two elements (theories and experience) meet and students critically reflect on theory and organisational practices related to leadership (see Fig 1). This critical reflection can act as a direct source of leadership learning(see Gray, 2007, Mintzberg, 2004).

The students who do not have any experience in leadership activities in organisations can also contribute to this reflection by looking at the experiences of students (who currently work in or worked in the past in organisations) through theories they learn in the classroom and critically reflect on both theories and practices. As a result the critical reflection which happen in the classroom is a shared critical reflection which in turn can act as a direct source of "shared learning". Such learning can be carried back to the organisations by the students (who currently work in organisations) where it impact on leadership activities in the organisations and provide further critical reflection on the activities on their organization (reflection in the real world). The students can bring such reflection in the real world back to the classroom for further discussion (see Mintzberg, 2004).

Leadership Learning
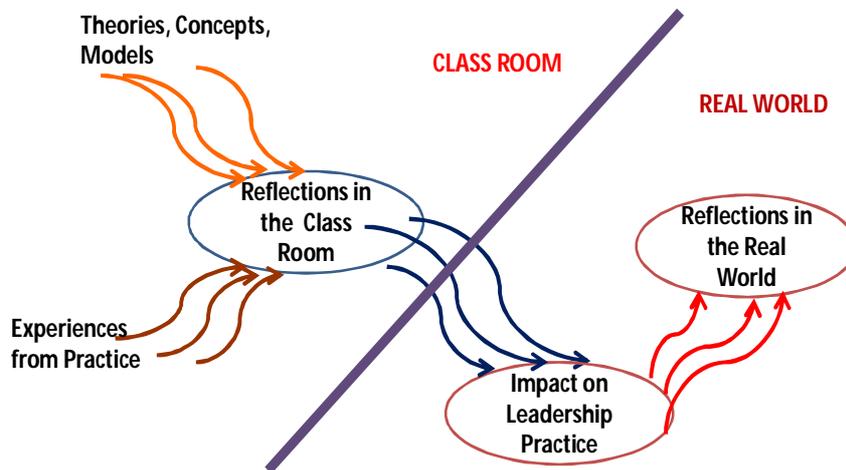
Fig 1 Leadership Learning; Adapted from Mintzberg (2004)

The above discussed process (inside and outside the classroom) can take place on weekly basis throughout the module and the reflection in the classroom as a formative assessment can happen after each theoretical discussions in the timetabled sessions of the MBA leadership module.

Tools for Critical Reflection: Story Telling

Critical reflection is very difficult activity as it demands participants to dig deep into their deep rooted assumptions and open up their minds to new and sometime very radical ideas. Subsequently students might find it hard to perform critical reflection. Nevertheless there are many tools that can help students to perform this activity more efficiently and comfortably (see Gray, 2007) and I propose the "story telling" tool for critical reflection inside the classroom (see Fenwick, 2005). Garry (2007) points out:

"Storytelling is a powerful means by which we can seek to explore and understand our own values, ideas and norms... It can help us to create order out of a chaotic world... Storytelling is a collective act (in the sense that stories are told to people), encouraging us to share meanings (because meanings must be made explicit if the story is to be understood)....
....They must also allow listeners to learn about organizational norms—'how things are done around here'. Structurally, they involve the description of the setting, a build-up ('trouble's coming!'), and a crisis or climax. Then, crucially, they (hopefully) also involve learning and new behaviours or awareness....."

So, in the classroom the students are requested to discuss stories about their organizations (hereafter referred to as organizational stories). These discussions need to happen in smaller groups (maximum number of students in the group should be 5) that represent a diversity in terms of fulltime, part-time, gender, disability, nationality, and the amount of experience in organizations. Such group work also encourages deep learning rather than surface learning as students have greater autonomy over their learning and they actively involve in their studies related to group work (Almond, 2009, Fernandes et al., 2012, Nordberg, 2008). They also get opportunities to experience diverse learning styles and individual difference in terms of gender, culture, professional backgrounds etc that will be useful in their working and personal lives (Almond, 2009). The outcome of this small group discussion is a group presentation to the whole class.

Classroom Setting

For deep reflection to occur in this process students need to be in a relax environment. As a result, rigid classroom setting which lines up students in neat rows need to be changed . These rigid classroom settings appear to indicate that the responsibility of the lecturer is giving information to students and students need to absorb all of them. It also creates a social and psychological barrier as some students tend to perceive that the lecturer has power over them. The classroom with round tables (see Fig 2) is suitable for this activity as such type of classroom could facilitate natural discussions in small groups. Each round table could perform as a small learning community within the larger learning community that is the whole class (see Mintzberg, 2004).

Fig 2 Classroom Setting

In this process the lecturer need to play a facilitator role to stimulate the deep and insightful critical reflection. Here the lecturer is not a bland facilitator who passively listen to multiple interpretations of organizational stories presented by students. Instead the lecturer needs to "work with" the students to make key connections among theoretical concepts and their organizational stories whilst creating conditions that motivate the students to recognise how their perceptions are framed by established practices and theories(Brookfield, 2002).

*Dialogic Feedback and Student Engagement*

The lecture's feedback/feed forward is potentially most powerful part of this critical reflection within the group. In this context it is a timely "oral feedback". Growing research evidence shows that "oral feedback" in the context of higher education is much more effective than other forms of feedback (King et al., 2008). But such feedback should not be an act of "telling" students in which students are considered as passive recipients. Instead the feedback should pay adequate attention to the participative nature of communication between the lecturer and the students (Boud and Molloy, 2013). This implies that the lectures' feedback to the students in the critical reflection should be participative and central to this participation is "dialogue" between the lecturer and student.(see Stenton, 2011).

Such "dialogic feedback" creates a environment which enable and motivate students to think critically, reflect critically and engage in critical actions. The lecturer's role here is to encourage students to challenge established basic assumptions not only in leadership theories but also in leadership practices in organisations and consequently propose alternative critical actions in the classroom. In other words this dialogic feedback within the critical reflection process needs to liberate minds of MBA students and create the potential for classroom as a site for possible radical organisational change by understanding the importance of challenging oppression and hegemony in organizations(Dehler, 2009). For example the critical reflections facilitated by the lecturer might enable MBA students to challenge status quo which emphasises on "maximizing shareholder profit" whilst ignoring a wider purpose of "public good"(see Gentile, 2008). In the same way this dialogic feedback would enable the students to appreciate the followers' knowledgeable agency (in the leader-follower context) and their hidden potential in improving organizational performance. Central argument here is that the students (followers or leaders) need to appreciate that leaders require to create an environment in which employees (followers) feel empowered to highlight the internal contradictions and problems that plague their organizations. Indeed this is a radical approach because many leadership courses tend to highlight that the "view from the top" is always right and ignore the fact that followers have considerable insights and experience about organizational decision making (see Collinson and Tourish, 2015).

Developing New Leadership Skills, Knowledge and Behaviours

In this critical reflective process the students are more likely to slip into "armchair radicalism" within the safety of classroom walls without paying sufficient attention to the complex power relationships in organizations in which they are embedded. So the lecturer as a facilitator needs to help prospective leaders (students) not only to suggest alternative actions but also to find feasible ways to implement them by challenging the power bases in organizations. Indeed this a testing task but such exercise, facilitated by "dialogic feedback" in which multiple perspectives are presented and debated, will enable students to develop new knowledge, skills and behaviours to lead today's complex organizations (see Fig 3).

Developing New Skills , Knowledge and Behaviours
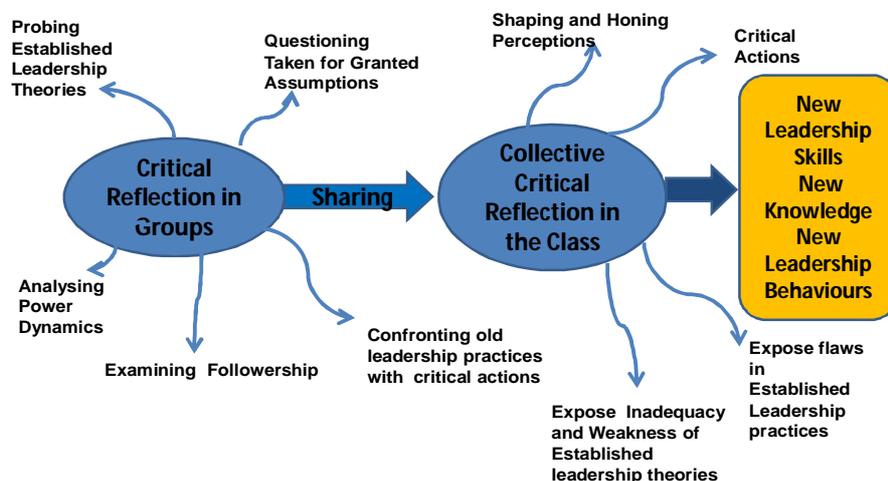
Fig 3 Developing New Skills, Knowledge and Behaviours

Conclusions

The paper highlights the limitations of conventional approaches to leadership education in MBA programmes. It proposes an alternative approach that employs the process of "assessment for learning" which is embedded in critical reflection. As a result this alternative approach encourages students not only to challenge conventional theories and practices in leadership but also to offer alternative critical actions to improve leadership activities in organisations. The paper demonstrates that the process of assessment for learning embed in critical reflection can be utilised to urge students to (1) realise that view from the top is not always right and as a result constructively questioning dominant views of privileged positions in organizations while addressing the issues of power dynamics in the organizations, is important (2) appreciate the followers' dissent as a critical actions, considering their knowledge and experience.

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